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# Moving to Australia

After nearly 24 years working at the Open University in the UK - most recently as Professor of Education (Futures) - I have decided to move to Australia (as Professor of Education (Innovation in schooling and educational technology) at the University of Newcastle (in NSW). Several people have asked me 'Why?'.

I have spent the last 35 years or so working in the English school system as a primary school teacher, teacher educator, and academic focussed on enhancing education and in particular education for school age learners. During that time I have seen changes in the English school system that I believe damage the quality of young people's learning. Many of these initiative in the 1980s through to the early 21st century undermined teaching as a profession (see Is teaching still a profession?[1]) and reflected a distrust in both teachers and learners.

The changes to the National Curriculum that came into force in 2014 represented a shift in theoretical stance - away from a concern with "the capability to understand and apply that understanding with judgement" (Twining et al 2017[2] p.6) to a focus on memorisation and recall of 'general knowledge' and "a firm grasp of the basics" (Nick Gibb cited by Patton[3]). This is illustrated for example in the revised Natioinal Curriculum History specification which places "a strong emphasis on chronology which represents a move away from the practices of history towards the facts of history" (Twining et al 2017 p.6). This is a shift from a constructivist to behaviourist stance. Looking at schools in England now it is hard to believe that they are actually in the 21st century.

This shift back towards 'traditional approaches' was further exacerbated by changes in the assessment regime away from course work and modularisation and towards 'terminal exams'. This focus was re-emphasised in the English Government's recent EdTech Strategy[4], where for example, the focus was on improving attainment on paper-based assessments rather than using digital technology to enable us to find ways to measure the things that matter (and can't feasibly be captured on paper).

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[1] https://halfbaked.education/is-teaching-still-a-profession/
[2] http://edfutures.net/images/e/e7/NP3_Meta-analysis_report.pdf
[3] https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/7809282/Coalition-axes-Labours-academic-diplomas.html
[4] https://halfbaked.education/etag-and-the-edtech-strategy/

Given the critical importance of high stakes assessment as a key driver of practice in schools the doubling down on paper-based terminal exams is a regressive step. Indeed, paper-based terminal exams fail to meet many of [the characteristics of effective summative assessment](5).

Evidence from my research (e.g. [The Vital Studies](6); [NP3](7)) indicates that the assessment and accountability systems in English schools are a major constraint on pedagogy (including limiting the effective use of digital technology).

High stakes testing in England has become an indicator of (supposed) school quality rather than a measure of young people's knowledge, skills and attributes. This has led to a focus on gaming the system often at the expense of enhancing learning.

Overall, the gap between the political rhetoric about the need to develop 'knowledge age skills' and the pedagogical reality in English schools has increased over the last 30+ years. Where teachers are implementing [more appropriate pedagogical strategies](8) they are doing this in spite of the system rather than because of it. Overall the scope for positive change in English schools seems very limited at present.

Australia suffers from some similar issues - such as an over emphasis on international comparisons based on high stake assessments such as PISA (for example see [Gonski 2.0](9)). However, there does seem to be greater scope to do things differently in Australia.

For example, within New South Wales (where I am heading), a number of schools are implementing parallel programmes based on [the Big Picture model](10) alongside the more traditional mainstream pathways. Early evidence seems to indicate that the Big Picture approach "can begin to address some of the most persistent problems facing education systems today around student engagement, deeper learning, aspirations and student wellbeing" ([Down et al 2018](11) p.21).

One of the challenges of the Big Picture model is that young people often emerge from their schooling without 'normal' qualifications. Last year The University of Newcastle admitted a small number of students from local Big Picture programmes into their undergraduate courses. The issue now is how to scale this up. This is a challenge - how best to provide evidence of young people's knowledge skills and attributes in a concise but credible way?  It is also a major opportunity to investigate how new approaches to assessment might work (e.g. see [What is Point of Learning](12) and [AI and assessment](13)) and to engage with stakeholders to redesign the metrics that we use and how we report them.

So, the offer of a post in the School of Education at the University of Newcastle (in New South Wales), with a remit to developing an international centre for research in schooling fit for purpose in the 21st century was too good to miss. The beautiful beaches and plentiful sunshine are just icing on the cake.

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5  [https://halfbaked.education/characteristics-of-effective-summative-assessment/](https://halfbaked.education/characteristics-of-effective-summative-assessment/)
6  [http://edfutures.net/ICT_strategy_research](http://edfutures.net/ICT_strategy_research)
7  [http://edfutures.net/NP3_outcomes_related_to_RQ3](http://edfutures.net/NP3_outcomes_related_to_RQ3)
8  [https://halfbaked.education/how-should-we-teach/](https://halfbaked.education/how-should-we-teach/)
9  [https://docs.education.gov.au/node/50516](https://docs.education.gov.au/node/50516)
10  [https://www.bigpicture.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=389353&type=d&pREC_ID=902235](https://www.bigpicture.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=389353&type=d&pREC_ID=902235)
11  [https://www.bigpicture.org.au/news/promising-practices-indeed](https://www.bigpicture.org.au/news/promising-practices-indeed)
12  [https://halfbaked.education/what-is-point-of-learning-pol-moving-beyond-standardised-testing/](https://halfbaked.education/what-is-point-of-learning-pol-moving-beyond-standardised-testing/)
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